

Cambridge Research Papers on Sikhism

Sikhs, Arms and Terrorism

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Preface

Sikhism is one of the great religions of the World. Its philosophical basis, developed by the Sikh Prophets over two centuries, is perhaps deeper than that of any other modern religion. Its precepts embody a remarkable range of ideas, encompassing deep mysticism as well as highly practical guidance on everyday living.

In view of its contribution in the past, and what its history and teachings can offer mankind in the future, it is extraordinary that so little is known about it in the West. Due to the events of the last two years, a considerable amount of interest has been aroused concerning the position of Sikhs in India. Unfortunately, a high proportion of the information provided by the media in this period has been subjective at best, and often totally misleading.

In order to provide a more balanced, and a more scholarly approach, the Sikh Society of the University of Cambridge has decided to institute a series of research papers into the philosophy, and the religion of the Sikhs as well as into their current position in India and outside it.

It gives me considerable pleasure to welcome the first paper in the series by Devinderjit Singh. This paper provides an objective analysis of the religious, political, social and economic factors, which led to the sad and extremely tragic recent events in the Punjab. It begins by discussing the background to the present crisis. This is followed by an examination of the issues which outraged and inflamed Sikh feelings and sentiments. This leads to an analysis of the aims and strategies of the civil-rights movement which was initiated in 1982, and an examination of the brutal way in which it was suppressed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the aftermath of the destruction of the Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Akal Takhat, and the barbaric violence against Sikhs outside Punjab.

The issues raised and discussed in this paper are fundamental for the understanding of the current situation facing the Sikhs in India. I hope it receives the attention it deserves.

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January, 1986

Note

Although I wrote this paper in the mid-1980's, I've been told that people still find it interesting and useful; therefore, I have recompiled it as a PDF file. I would also recommend the more recent book by Gurtej Singh, the National Professor of Sikhism: *Tandav of the Centaur — Sikhs and Indian Secularism*, published by the Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh (1996).

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Sikhs, Arms and Terrorism

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(January, 1986)

*He who frightens no one,
Nor himself fears any;
Such a man, says Nanak,
Enlightened is his soul.*

(Guru Granth Sahib, Shloka 16, p.1427)

Sikhs, arms and terrorism. These words have appeared frequently in the news media over the last couple of years. Their increasingly collective nature seems to stem from the problems in the Punjab. This article takes a comprehensive look at the events and issues, putting them in an historical and religious perspective.

1. The background

The roots of the present problem go back to before the Independence of India. At that time the British envisaged the formation of three separate countries: one dominated by Hindus, one by Moslems and one by Sikhs. The Sikhs on the basis of solemn assurances given to them by Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and other Congress leaders, regarding their constitutional and religious freedoms, put their trust in the Hindu majority and opted to remain as part of India. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the trust was misplaced. Ever since Independence, for them, it has been a long and fruitless struggle to win those rights which had been assured to them as long ago as 1929.

The brave Sikhs of Punjab are entitled to special consideration. I see nothing wrong in an area and a set up in the North wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom.¹

These are the words of Jawahrlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, three years prior to Independence. They symbolise the goodwill and understanding promised to the Sikhs by the Congress. More formal assurances were also given to the Sikhs regarding their future in India, over the 30 years leading up to Independence.

Before we continue, it is important to note that the Sikh position was different from the rest of India. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Sikhs had a large sovereign kingdom of their own, stretching from just north of Delhi to the Afghanistan border. After the death of the ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), infighting amongst the Sikhs and clever manoeuvring on the part of the British resulted in the absorption of Punjab into the British Empire. However, the British exercised control over the Punjab through treaties made directly with the (former) Sikh Raj and not as part of India. Therefore, any negotiations for the end of British rule in the subcontinent would, naturally, have involved the discussion of Punjab as a separate entity. Or, more precisely, that would have been the case up to about 1930. From the late twenties onwards, the Congress party started to woo the Sikhs and persuaded them to join the Union

¹Congress Committee meeting, Calcutta – July, 1944.

of India. Congress was greatly helped in this by the feeling amongst the Sikhs that they were all brothers looked in a common struggle for independence.

The first assurance was given in 1929, following a huge independence rally held by Sikhs in Lahore; in the words of the Times, the 500,000 strong procession led by the veteran Sikh leader Baba Kharak Singh, 'put the Congress show into shame and shadow'. Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and other Congress leaders then met Baba Kharak Singh and gave the Sikhs their solemn assurance that:

After India has achieved political freedom, no constitution will be framed by the majority unless it is freely acceptable to the Sikhs.²

Two years later, in 1931, Mahatma Gandhi reiterated this assurance at Gurdwara Sisgang in Delhi, adding:

I ask you to accept my word and the resolution of the Congress that it will not betray a single individual much less a community. If it ever thinks of doing so, it will not only hasten its own doom but that of the country too.³

Congress also passed several resolutions concerning the political make up of post-independence India: it committed itself to a union of states, to be based on linguistic and cultural boundaries and, which were to be loosely governed by a federal government.⁴ Only months before Independence, Nehru declared:

The various territories of the Union of India will be autonomous units with residuary powers.⁵

But ultimately, it was the human value of trust rather than formal resolutions which persuaded the Sikhs to remain as part of India. After all, using Nehru's words, the commitment to uphold the rights of the minorities was:

²Congress, Lahore session – 1929.

³*Young India*: 16th March, 1931.

⁴The commitment to linguistic states was first made at the Nagpur Congress session in 1920, but it was reaffirmed in Congress sessions held in 1921, 1927, 1928, 1937, 1938 and 1945/6.

⁵Constituent assembly – 9th December, 1946.

... a declaration, a pledge and an undertaking before the world, a contract with millions of Indians, and therefore, in the nature of an oath, which must be kept.⁶

Such was the faith of the Sikhs in the sincerity or the congress assurances that the Sikh leadership stated:

Sikhs have no demands to make. They will satisfy their political rights and aspirations through the goodwill of the congress and the majority community.⁷

The 'goodwill', however, seems to have evaporated rapidly with the coming of Independence. One of the most immediate and vivid examples was a secret circular sent out to all Deputy Commissioners in Punjab by the Home Minister V. B. Patel. In essence, they were instructions that Sikhs, particularly those migrating from Pakistan, should be treated like a 'criminal tribe'; they were urged to be severe so that the Sikhs should wake up to the political realities and recognise 'who are the masters and who the slaves'.⁸

In 1950, when the Indian constitution was drafted, Sikhs (along with Buddhists and Jains) were categorised as Hindus. The Sikhs were deeply offended by this and saw it as a refusal by Congress to recognise the independence of their religion. Therefore, considering the constitution unacceptable, and having felt betrayed, the Sikh representatives walked out in protest and refused to ratify the constitution. However, Sikh protests had virtually no effect and gradually all the personal laws of the Sikhs were abolished and Hindu laws were enforced upon them. For example, the 'Anand Marriage Act' was replaced by the 'Hindu Marriage Act', of 1955.⁹ All this despite the solemn promise that no constitution would be imposed on them!

After Independence, Congress also started to drag its feet on the re-organisation of state boundaries on linguistic and cultural grounds. How-

⁶Constituent assembly – 9th December, 1946.

⁷London – May, 1947.

⁸Kapur Singh (I.C.S.): *Sachi Sakhi*.

⁹*Anand Karaj* is the Sikh marriage ceremony. Sikh marriages were 'legalised' by the British in 1909, by the 'Anand Marriage Act'.

ever, by the mid-fifties the Government had conceded to the formation of linguistically based states in the South of the country — Andhra, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. At the same time, agitations were also going on demanding a Punjabi-speaking state, but these were to no avail. Without going into the detailed history of the agitations, commissions and political manoeuvring,¹⁰ it suffices to note that the end result was the formation of Haryana, an extended Himacheal Pradesh and the present Punjab by 1966. This was not the solution the Sikhs had been looking for. Sikhs had already suffered greatly as a result of the partitioning of Punjab between India and Pakistan in 1947.¹¹ And now, the already shrunken Punjab was further being lopped in half to form a Hindi-speaking state (Haryana), which nobody had asked for. Furthermore, the small remnant Punjab was still denied the status of a Punjabi-speaking area and was declared a bilingual state. Of course a language census was taken but this was a total farce: so much anti-Punjabi (hence, implicitly anti-Sikh) hysteria had been whipped up by extreme Hindu groups like the *Jan Sang* (more will be said about these later) that virtually all Punjabi-speaking Hindus denied Punjabi as their language and claimed 'allegiance' to Hindi. The sad fact is that most of these Punjabi-speaking Hindus had to deny that their mother-tongue was Punjabi in Punjabi itself, since their knowledge of Hindi was non-existent!

To go back to the situation in the 1950's, when Nehru was reminded of the assurances he had given to the Sikhs before Independence and all the broken promises since, his reply was simply 'the circumstances have now changed'. Indeed, the times had changed: Congress was no longer seeking power but was in power and the Sikhs were increasingly given the feeling of being 'undesirable' elements of Indian society rather than an integral part of it.

Post-independence events suggest that Congress was not prepared to

¹⁰A good, brief account is given in the Autumn 1984 edition of the *Sikh Messenger* in an article entitled 'Betrayal of the Sikhs', by Maj. Gen. J.S. Bhullar, S. Gurtej Singh and Prof. M. S. Sidhu.

¹¹*Punjab* means the 'Land of Five Rivers'; namely these were Jehlum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej. At partition 3/5 of the real Punjab went to Pakistan and 2/5 to India. Partition not only entailed the trauma of millions being forced to leave their homes and moving to the 'unknown' but also resulted in the brutal deaths of tens of thousands.

accept the Sikhs for what they were — a distinct religious and cultural community forming one of the nations in the Union of India — but rather, they were regarded as breakaway Hindus to be brought back into the folds of Hinduism. Ian Stephens, an historian and journalist who spent much of his life in India, comments:

The British, after 1857, may in a general way be said to have buttressed Sikhism up, for Imperial purposes of their own. And since the sub-continent's partition in 1947, political pressures from Delhi for the Sikhs' reabsorption into Hinduism have inevitably become stronger.¹²

Since Independence, Sikhs have felt that their religion has been constantly under attack through political and economic discrimination against Punjab (their homeland) and through conspired interference in their religious affairs. For example, the failure to form a Punjabi-speaking state is seen as an attempt to undermine Sikhism by destroying its cultural roots, since the Sikh Scriptures are written in Punjabi. This suspicion is not unfounded as most of the Punjabi-speaking Hindus were persuaded to deny Punjabi as their language (by Hindu fundamentalists) on the grounds that 'Punjabi implied Sikhism'. What is more, Punjabi has been banned from schools in the neighbouring states like Haryana — a former part of Punjab with a large (traditionally) Punjabi-speaking population. Instead, languages like Tamil, from South India, which have no cultural links with the North are being introduced as the second languages in schools.¹³

Economically too, Punjab, a largely farming state, has been made to suffer. Farmers in Punjab have to pay higher prices for their agricultural inputs but are offered lower prices for their produce in comparison with neighbouring states; the central government has assumed sole control over prices and farmers are not allowed to cross state boundaries to get higher prices for their labours in the next state. Again, electricity generated by the hydro-electric dam Bhakra on the Punjab border is more

¹²Stephens: *Unmade Journey*, p. 271

¹³Even today 30% of Haryana is Punjabi-speaking and, of course, Southern States do not teach northern languages, like Punjabi, as second languages in their schools.

costly in Punjab than it is in neighbouring states. Very little has been invested in the Punjab by the government, particularly in industrial terms. The government, of course, claims that Punjab is already a rich state and so the wealth and investment must be channelled into poorer states. This is perfectly reasonable now but one has to realise that in 1947 Punjab was a state utterly broken and totally ruined both economically and socially by the Partition with Pakistan; it has only become successful by the hard work and initiative of its inhabitants and with virtually no help from Delhi. Now that Punjab is a fairly rich state, and industrial development is no longer a question of finance from Delhi, the central government still frustrates any attempt to develop Punjab. The state government is powerless to undertake any major regional development programme without the permission of Delhi — the states are hardly ‘autonomous units’ as Nehru had promised.

Even more serious than the general and widespread discrimination against the Sikhs in India is the malicious interference in their religious affairs. One form in which this appears is the strong support given to breakaway groups from Sikhism. The formation of new sects is inevitable, of course, and this occurs in every religion and society. However, the situation becomes very suspect when the government gives large grants and land to new ‘movements’ whilst, at the same time, causing as much hindrance as possible to the spread of all main-stream religions except Hinduism. There are several such groups which are Sikh-like in appearance but fundamentally opposed to it¹⁴ and which have grown out of all proportions purely as a result of government funding. The motivation for such action can only be to cause divisions amongst the Sikhs and thereby undermine their religion.

Perhaps we should conclude this section by one last example of how the Sikhs have been made to feel more and more alienated from India since Independence. The issue is the restrictions on the recruitment and promotion of Sikhs in the armed forces; this especially-offends the Sikhs for, at least since the inception of the Khalsa, they have considered themselves a martial race. Even now, the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi claims

¹⁴See, for example, the article ‘The Guru of the Sikhs’ in the June 1984 Special edition of the *Khalsa*.

that there is no discrimination considering that the Sikhs are represented by numbers greater than their proportion in the country. For the Sikhs, however, it is not a matter of numbers and percentages. For example, before independence Sikhs formed 60% of the volunteer Indian Liberation Army led by Subhas Bose even though they only formed just over 1% of the population. The same is true for the other sacrifices made in the struggle for the Independence of India and also since Independence. The Sikhs feel that they have been loyal to the country and served her in her hour of need, out of all proportion to their numbers; by now insisting that Sikhs should only represent 2% of the forces they are deeply insulted, and feel that they are perceived as some sort of threat to the country. For the Sikhs it has never been a matter of 2% or 20% but, rather, a question of being treated with equality as Indian citizens, and judged on their merits and not dismissed as a small minority.

2. The demands of the 'current' agitation

Over the last 37 years, the intensity of the negotiations and agitations has varied periodically; the latest upsurge being over the last 2/3 years until it was savagely brought to an end in June 1984. Following several years of fruitless negotiations with the Indian government, the Sikh leadership initiated another peaceful civil rights movement in 1982. Most of the demands of this movement were based on economic and linguistic issues and were for the benefit of all Punjabis (not just Sikhs). A few demands did relate specifically to the Sikhs, but these in no way harmed any other community. It was not a communal dispute between Hindus and Sikhs but a regional dispute between the people of Punjab and the central government in Delhi.

The demands of the 'current' agitation were based on the so-called *Anandpur Resolution*.¹⁵ In essence, the Resolution demanded greater autonomy for Punjab on lines similar to the provisions already applicable to the State of Jammu & Kashmir. The principal demands were as follows:

(a) Redrawing the boundaries of Punjab to redress the imbalance and its deviation from linguistic and cultural principles including the return of Chandigarh to Punjab.

The principles underlying this demand are not new, but are totally consistent with Congress resolutions made before Independence. The failure to implement these, in the case of Punjab, has already been mentioned. However, it is interesting to recollect that Nehru's own words comply with the sentiments of this motion:

It is better to have linguistic states as to bring one kind of people speaking one language and generally having similar customs into one provincial area.¹⁶

The question of Chandigarh is a direct consequence of post-independence events: Punjab lost its historic capital Lahore in the partition with Pak-

¹⁵Anandpur is the birth place of the Khalsa (13th April, 1699). The Sikhs gathered and agreed upon the resolution here in 1973.

¹⁶Nehru: *Glimpses of World History*, p.22.

istan and so Chandigarh was built to be the new state capital. However, after the second, unwarranted, partition of Punjab to form Haryana, when several thousand Punjab villages were unjustly annexed, Punjab again lost its capital city. Sikhs strongly feel that Chandigarh, being a Punjabi area, should be returned to Punjab and that a new capital city should be built for Haryana. As things stand, Chandigarh is the only 'state-capital' which is on 'Union-territory' and not part of the parent state.

(b) The judicious determination of river water and electricity disputes.¹⁷

Punjab is a highly productive agricultural state and is in many ways responsible for making India self-sufficient in food. For example, Punjab provides India with 70% of its grain, despite its small size. However, Punjab is a semi-arid state and depends heavily on irrigation for its agricultural success. Several canals already take water from Punjab's rivers to other states — for example, the twin canals which go to the desert state of Rajasthan. This is fine so long as the arrangements are agreed upon mutually and Punjab's own survival is not put at stake. However, the farmers of Punjab (mainly Sikhs) were alarmed when they discovered that the central government had unilaterally made plans to divert even more of Punjab's river waters to other states. They showed remarkable restraint in their willingness to allow the Supreme Court to give its verdict on the issue considering that their whole future and livelihoods hung in the balance. However, the refusal of Mrs. Gandhi's government to allow the Supreme Court to settle the dispute only fuelled the suspicions of the Sikhs about the intentions of the central government. Again, it is interesting to note that Punjab is the only state whose rivers are exclusively controlled by the Indian government, all other rivers being controlled by their respective state governments.

The Sikhs also see their state victimised on the question of electric power: For example, Bhakra dam was built in Punjab but now, not only is it no longer in Punjab¹⁸ but also, Punjab gets a much smaller portion

¹⁷More details of the subsequent points can be found in the article 'Betrayal of the Sikhs' (Bhullar *et al.*), in the Autumn 1984 edition of the *Sikh Messenger*.

¹⁸The borders of Himachal were extended in 1962 and annexed Bhakra Dam (on completion).

of its electricity than the neighbouring states and at a higher price!

(c) Greater autonomy for the States

Punjab has experienced a great deal of interference from Delhi in its internal affairs. This has been particularly true in the case of regional industrial development by the state government which has been almost totally thwarted. For example, the plan of the Punjab government to build the Thien dam on the river Ravi, to alleviate the increasing demand for more power and water in the state, has been frustrated by the central government withholding clearance for the scheme for the last 18 years. Even development projects which are funded wholly by the state itself are often refused permission by Delhi!

The Sikhs feel that individual states should have much more control over state issues and that Delhi should only have control over national issues. Neither is this demand only applicable to Punjab, and nor is it in any way radical: In addition to Nehru's own declaration that the states would be 'autonomous units', the British 'Transfer of Power Act 1947' also provided that:

The Indian Government will be a federal, loose-centre Government exercising power on only three subjects, namely, communication, defence and foreign affairs.

(d) The religious demands

The above three demands dealt with economic and political matters and were 'regional' demands, independent of Sikh issues. However, this last category related specifically with Sikh matters. Considering that these demands affected only the Sikhs, the really surprising thing is that they had to be included at all.

For example, one of the demands was that permission be given for the broadcast of Kirtan (Hymns) from the Golden Temple to Sikhs living abroad, particularly in Europe and North America. The Sikhs were willing to fund the venture themselves¹⁹ and so it should have been just

¹⁹Actually, the resolution not only committed the Sikhs to fund the broadcasts themselves but also left the control of the broadcasts in the hands of the government!

a matter of allocating a suitable transmission frequency — as in other matters, permission from Delhi was not forthcoming. Another grievance concerned the fact that Sikhs had been wrongly categorised as Hindus in the Indian Constitution. To change this should have been just a technical matter from the national viewpoint but one which would have gone some way in restoring the shattered confidence of the Sikhs in the ‘goodwill’ of the Indian Government. Similarly, according ‘Sacred City’ status to Amritsar²⁰, another of the demands, should have been just a routine matter; after all, Hindu holy cities like Benares and Kurukshetra already had this status. But, alas, the government considered it unacceptable to concede to even these and other minor demands — requests seemingly trivial to the non-Sikh.

As we have seen, the demands of the agitation were in no way radical or extreme but, rather, they were simply a consequence of the failure of successive Indian Governments to implement pre-independence pledges. Indeed, for the Sikhs the Anandpur Resolution was not a list of ‘demands’ but a ‘Charter of Rights’. However, it is worth emphasising that most of the Sikh demands weren’t ‘Sikh’ demands at all but were regional demands. The conflict was not between Sikhs and Hindus but between Punjab (which is over 40% Hindu) and Delhi. But then the question arises that if this is true, why did it appear to be a Sikh problem and not a Punjabi problem? The glib answer is that, that is the way it was portrayed in the media — true enough, but we must search deeper to discover a more meaningful answer.

Well, the Sikhs are very active and also visually distinctive. The former is amply illustrated by their contribution in the struggle for India’s Independence. The following figures were provided by the late Maulana Abul Azad, president of the Congress Party at the time of Independence, and relate specifically to Independence-related sacrifices:

- (i) Out of 2,125 martyrs, 1550 were Sikhs.
- (ii) Out of 2646 exiled to the Andaman islands, 2147 were Sikhs.
- (iii) Out of 127 Indians sent to the gallows, 92 of them were Sikhs.

²⁰In practical terms, ‘Sacred City’ status would have meant that there were no butchers, barbers, tobacco or liquor shops in the vicinity of the Golden Temple.

The Sikhs made the overwhelming majority of the sacrifices even though they only formed just over 1% of the population. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Sikhs dominated the civil-rights movement in Punjab, a state where they formed just over half the population.

If we want to delve even deeper to find out why the Sikhs are so motivated on civil-rights issues, we must take a brief look at Sikhism itself.

3. Sikhism and liberation theology

*Grant me this wish O' Lord, that
May I never refrain from righteous acts.*

(Guru Gobind Singh)

The love for freedom, justice and equality is deeply engrained in Sikhism and is symbolised in the Sikh emblem. To stand up to the opposing forces of tyranny and injustice is considered a moral duty of every Sikh. In fact, the idea that 'Religion' and the 'Politics of Freedom' must go hand in hand is central to the very basis of Sikhism. This is clearly evident when we consider that the concept of an ideal Sikh is not that of a Saint but a 'Saint- Soldier' (Khalsa): the saintly nature incorporates the traditional moral values of religion and inherently represents a peace-loving individual whilst the soldier aspect demonstrates the resolve to uphold the social values of justice and freedom in which such a peaceful society can exist. As a result, Sikhs and arms are inseparably linked. The failure to recognise this, stemming from an inadequate understanding and appreciation of the underlying Sikh principles, played an important part in allowing the government of India to exploit the situation.

In recent months leading clergymen, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, have drawn sharp criticism for their comments on issues such as unemployment and nuclear disarmament; 'keep religion out of politics', is a common cry. Pope John Paul II has expressed strong reservations on the involvement of his Bishops in the liberation struggles of Central America. The underlying theme of this controversy is the role of religion in everyday society.

Traditionally, religion has been construed as being purely spiritual and is often seen as being inconsistent with a social (worldly) life. Even today the Roman Catholic Church, for example, places a high value on a celibate and monastic existence. The same is true of Eastern religions where renouncing the world and retreating to the solitude of the Himalayas is common practice.

Five hundred years ago Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, rejected this view of religion. 'How goes the world below?', the hermits and

Yogis would ask him. His reply was scathing: ‘Sin has enslaved the world and falsehood rules. Who will free the world when those that claim moral insight flee to the caves and forest retreats and practice pointless penance?’²¹

For Guru Nanak the place for religion was firmly within society:

*Lead an active and hard-working life;
By honest work earn the comforts of life;
Through devoted remembrance attain Union with God.
Thus, O’ Nanak, all worries are dispelled.*

(Guru Granth Sahib: Raga Gujri, p. 522)

The belief in one God is the basic axiom of Sikhism. It is the fundamental principle on which the Sikh Faith rests. However, Guru Nanak considered worship which had been reduced to mere ritual to be meaningless; instead, he taught that religious devotion should be founded on a deep-seated Love with God and that this relationship should manifest itself in every aspect of life. Thus, to a Moslem he would say:

*Five prayers at five times, five are their names:
Truth is first, honest labour second and charity the third;
The fourth asks for honesty in conduct and fifth the praise of
God.
Support these prayers with your actions,
and then call yourself a Muslim of the Lord.*

(Guru Granth Sahib: Raga Maj, p. 141)

Similarly, to a Yogi Guru Nanak would say:

*Make contentment your ear-rings, honest work your begging
bowl and meditation the ashes smeared on your body.
Let mortality be your floor-mat, an abuse-free body your
practice and Faith your beating-stick.*

(Guru Granth Sahib: Japji, p. 6)

²¹Bhai Gurdas: Var I, Pauri 29. (Bhai Gurdas helped Guru Arjan Dev to compile the Sikh Scriptures, the Adi Granth—the precursor of the Guru Granth Sahib. Although the writings of Bhai Gurdas are not included in the Guru Granth Sahib, they were given the status of ‘the Key to the Guru Granth Sahib’ by Guru Arjan.)

An immediate consequence of this viewpoint is the equality of all men and women — we are all the children of God. Hence, Guru Nanak strongly condemned all discrimination, whether it be on the basis of sex, colour, caste or creed. To underline this intrinsic equality of the human race the institution of ‘Langar’ was set up — a free kitchen where people from every corner of society (destitutes and emperors alike) sit together and share the same food.²² Langar was designed both as a practical way to breakdown social barriers and also to highlight the importance of communal service.

Continuing the same line of thought naturally leads to social beliefs structured around human rights. The commitment to protect these basic rights of every individual is deeply engrained in Sikhism. Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Guru of the Sikhs, demonstrated this by sacrificing his life for this principle: A high powered delegation of Brahmins from Kashmir came to see Guru Teg Bahadur at Anandpur and pleaded with him to protect their religion — the Moghul Emperor, Aurangzeb, was forcing them to embrace Islam, demolishing their temples and the destruction of Hinduism seemed imminent. Even though Guru Teg Bahadur did not agree with much of Hinduism, and was often very critical of the Brahmin behaviour, nevertheless, he believed that they had the right to practice their own religion. So, he agreed to champion their rights and, in so doing, had to sacrifice his own life — he was beheaded in Chandni Chowk, in Delhi, on November 11, 1675²³. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last (living) Sikh Guru, composed the following to commemorate Guru Teg Bahadur’s sacrifice for humanity:

*The Lord protected their frontal mark and sacred thread;
And performed a supremely heroic deed in this age of igno-
rance.
To uphold righteousness, so supreme an act did he perform.*

²²Guru Amar Das considered Langar so important that he insisted that everybody should partake of the Langar before seeing him; not even the Emperor of India, Akbar, was excused.

²³Three of Guru Teg Bahadur’s Sikhs who went to Delhi with him were put to death before him: Mati Das was sawn in two, Sati Das was burnt alive and Dyal Das was boiled in water.

*He gave his head, but did not utter a word of sorrow.
For the sake of righteousness, he did this heroic deed;
He laid down his life, but not the principles.*

The peaceful methods of persuasion having failed to put an end to the tyranny of Aurangzeb, Guru Gobind Singh then took up arms to uphold the rights of the weak and the oppressed:

*When all peaceful methods fail to ward off the enemy,
It is righteous to unsheath the sword.*

(Guru Gobind Singh: Zafarnama)

Guru Gobind Singh moulded his Sikhs into the Khalsa Panth — a nation of Saint-Soldiers. A divine army of people prepared to sacrifice their lives to protect the sacred values of Justice and Freedom.

Some observers see a sharp break between the ‘peaceful’ path pursued by Guru Nanak and the militant attitude of Guru Gobind Singh. In reality, however, there is no such break. The Khalsa Panth is just a formalisation of Guru Nanak’s view of Religion. This is apparent in the Sikh belief that the ten Gurus were all the same in Spirit.²⁴ Indeed, that the semi-martial nature of the Khalsa is consistent with the teachings of Guru Nanak is immediately obvious from the following Hymn:²⁵

*The conscience resounds with the battle-drum, as the wounds
of suffering strike the heart.
The warriors take up the battlefield; now is the time to sac-
rifice one’s all.
He alone is a true warrior, who fights for the weak and op-
pressed.*

²⁴After Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh Scriptures —Guru Granth Sahib —became the eternal Guru of the Sikhs; the Spirit of Guru Nanak is now enshrined in it’s holy words. (‘The Guru of the Sikhs’ —*Khalsa*, Special Edition - June 1984)

²⁵This Hymn is by Kabir —a contemporary Saint of Guru Nanak. While on his missionary travels, Guru Nanak collected the writings of various contemporary Saints like Farid, Kabir, Nam Dev, Ravi Das, Trilochan etc., whose writings were in accordance with Sikhism. These were incorporated into the Sikh Scriptures by Guru Arjan when he compiled the Adi Granth.

He dies shred limb by limb, but never deserts the battle.

(Guru Granth Sahib: Raga Maru, p. 1102)

Historically too, Guru Gobind Singh was not the only Sikh Guru to take up arms. In 1606 the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, was tortured to death by the Emperor Jahengir; religious intolerance was the cause of his execution.²⁶ His successor, Guru Hargobind, then had to take up arms against the Emperor's persecution.

Guru Arjan had been the Apostle of Peace — even under severe torture he accepted his ordeal calmly. However, Guru Hargobind showed that sometimes it becomes necessary to fight for one's freedom. But the motivation for this struggle must stem from a deep-seated love for peace. This may sound a little strange at first but it is an important concept in Sikhism — namely, the idea of 'Beer-Russ'. Peace comes first. But if peaceful methods fail to ensure one's basic freedoms then beer-russ is the force, which inspires the struggle against injustice. But, because beer-russ is founded on a love for peace, it provides the motivation to fight but without the feeling of anger, hatred or revenge — injustice is the only enemy. Fighting in this instance is seen as a call of duty resulting from a desire by every self-respecting individual to lead a dignified life. As Guru Nanak puts it: 'Cursed is a man who tolerates a life of indignity and humiliation'.²⁷

We have seen that 'Liberation Theology' is at the very heart of the Sikh religion. Guru Hargobind emphasised this by building the Akal Takhat directly in front of the Golden Temple.

The Golden Temple, at Amritsar, is the centre for the Sikhs' Spiritual inspiration. It is the House of God where people from every corner of the world are welcome to come and join in worship (this being symbolised by its four doors facing north, south, east and west). That the 'essence of Religion' is common to all faiths is clear from the Guru Granth Sahib — not only do the Sikh Scriptures contain the writings of the Sikh Gurus but they also contain the compositions of numerous contemporary Saints of

²⁶Although other pretexts were used to justify the execution, the fact that its real cause was the bigoted attitude of the Emperor is clear from Jahengir's autobiography. A translation can be found in the book by G.S.Sidhu: *Guru Arjan Dev*, p. 18.

²⁷Guru Granth Sahib: Raga Maj, p. 142.

various denominations. In fact, the very foundation stone of the Golden Temple was laid by the great Moslem Saint, Mian Meer, a close friend of Guru Arjan. Hymns are sung at the Golden Temple continuously from the early hours to late at night.

The Akal Takhat, meaning the 'Throne of the Immortal', is the centre for the Sikhs' political (temporal) decisions. It was set up to champion the cause of religious freedom and civil liberties — the idea of 'Miri' and 'Piri', 'Political and Spiritual Sovereignty'.²⁸ Setting the Akal Takhat alongside the Golden Temple was a gesture that Religion and the 'Politics of Freedom' must go together.

To summarise, Sikhism views it as a moral duty of every religious individual to speak out against injustice and fight against oppression. Since a Saint is peaceful by nature, peaceful methods of persuasion must be tried first. But if all efforts are to no avail, then beer-russ spurs the Saint to take up arms and purge tyranny with the sword. But religion has learnt, from bitter experience, that to even comment on social and political problems is a sure way to invite persecution. Either way, the commitment to uphold the values of human rights necessarily entails sacrifice. This is reflected in Guru Nanak's declaration:

*If you yearn to play the game of Devotion,
Carry your head on the palm of your hand, and then enter
the path of my Faith.
If on this path you tread, hesitate not to sacrifice your head.*

(Guru Granth Sahib: Shloka Vara-de-Vadhik, p. 1412)

²⁸The idea of 'Miri' and 'Piri' is reflected in the two swords of the Sikh Emblem (Guru Hargobind always wore these two swords) and two Sikh flags in front of the Akal Takhat.

4. The agitation

The civil-rights campaign, or 'morcha', was officially launched by the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, in Punjab on August 4, 1982. In accordance with Sikh principles, this movement was a peaceful one demanding the implementation of the Anandpur Resolution. The agitation took the form of demonstrations and strikes, which were entirely peaceful. During the two years of this campaign over 200,000 Sikhs courted arrest —about three times the number arrested in the whole of the 'Quit India' movement.²⁹

At the end of May 1984, the Sikh leadership decided to step-up its campaign and announced tentative plans to withhold the shipment of grain from the state. The government reacted swiftly by completely sealing-off the state and moved in the army on a massive scale. Despite the ejection of all foreign correspondents from Punjab, the horrifying scale on which Sikh men, women and children were then butchered, and the devastation of virtually all their historic Shrines in the state has become all too apparent.

To justify its actions, the Indian government accused the Sikhs of forming a coalition to secede from India and form a separate state —Khalistan. It also claimed that extremists and terrorists, under the leadership of Bhindranwale, had taken over the Golden Temple; it repeatedly pointed to the fact that about 300 people had been killed in the state over two years. Let us examine these claims and accusations.

The demands of the agitation made no mention of Khalistan, On numerous occasions, the leaders of the agitation categorically stated that they wished to remain an integral part of India. In fact, Bhindranwale's own reaction to the notion of Khalistan was one of perplexed astonishment:

I feel that I should make clear my position on the issue of Khalistan before the Sangat (congregation). I did not want to say anything on this matter because it is not an issue that concerns our morcha. However, due to persistent questioning, I think I should mention it briefly. Well, my position is quite simple: I am neither for nor against Khalistan. That is to say, we are not asking for Khalistan — it is not our demand. However, if the government feels that it cannot accommodate our just aspirations within

²⁹The 'Quit India' movement is the famous campaign launched by Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress party against British rule in India.

India and offers us a separate homeland, then we will not refuse it, as we did in 1947.

It was almost certainly some elements in the government who mischievously introduced the notion of Khalistan in the context of the agitation. Essentially, it was an alarmist tactic used to discredit the agitation and propagate the myth that Punjab was full of Sikh separatists. I know it had this effect on me personally: my reaction on reading the newspapers was, 'who are these lunatics wanting Khalistan?'. Fortunately, I was in a position to discover the truth of the matter. However, most people have to rely entirely on the media and there seems little doubt that this scare propaganda was effective in generating anti-Sikh feelings in India.

The Sikhs in general, and Bhindranwale in particular, were held responsible for the lawlessness in the state. This conclusion was based on purely circumstantial evidence — namely, the erroneous assumption that an armed Sikh implied a terrorist or an extremist. Leaving aside Sikh principles for the moment, even the bare facts of the situation refute the government's allegations. For example, Swami, an M.P., from Bombay who visited the Golden Temple in late April, 1984, noted some disturbing inconsistencies:³⁰

As a three day resident at the Golden Temple, I was not in a position to ascertain if criminals were hiding in the Temple complex. I cannot recognise any of them. The government keeps saying that criminals are hiding in the Temple area. Only once, about a year and a half ago, the government sent a list of 40 criminals to the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhik Committee (SGPC³¹). On examination the SGPC found that 18 of them just could not be in the Golden Temple. Some were in Pakistani jails for hijacking, some were in Canada & West Germany and, by the government's own admission in Parliament, two were dead. The remaining 22 could not be located inside the Temple by the SGPC screening committee, since the

³⁰Swami visited the Golden Temple on 25/6/7 April, 1984. His report on his visit is given in the appendix to the book *Sub kuj kaputar noo gudhi te batohn dhe lalsa adheen*, by Prof. Mehar-Chand Bhardwaj.

³¹The SGPC (Shromani Gurdwara Parbandak Committee) is the body which oversees the running of the major Sikh Shrines in Punjab.

particulars provided by the government were too vague. Later, in the Lok Sabha, the Home Minister, P.C. Sethi, admitted these facts. Since then, no further lists have been sent to the SGPC, and yet the government keeps declaring that criminals are hiding in the Temple complex!

I am also amazed to read newspaper reports of criminals walking in and out of the Temple campus undetected: The Golden Temple complex and its exits are surrounded by the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force and the Punjab police. In addition, RAW, IB and the state CID agents³² in plain clothes swarm the precincts of the Temple and yet proclaimed offenders stroll in and out of the Temple complex! How can this be?

Indeed, how could it be that the Sikhs could allow their most sacred shrine to be used as a terrorist camp? The question is absurd! If there had been a shred of evidence that Bhindranwale and his group were terrorists, they would have been immediately thrown out of the Golden Temple complex by the Sikhs.

Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa, Bhindranwale, was a religious preacher and the head of a highly respected missionary centre — the ‘Dam Dama Taksal’. This Taksal was set up by Guru Gobind Singh who appointed Baba Deep Singh to lead this centre, in 1708. However, this Taksal fell back into relative obscurity until it was headed by Sant Gurbachan Singh in the mid-1950’s. Gurbachan Singh was a very learned scholar and returned the Dam Dama Taksal to the forefront of Sikhism. As Sant Gurbachan Singh lived at Bhinder, this Taksal became associated with this village. Jarnail Singh grew up at this Taksal and obtained his religious training from Sant Gurbachan Singh. In 1977 he was selected to lead this Taksal and, consequently, he too was associated with the name of Bhinder and became known as Bhindranwale.

Sant Jarnail Singh vigorously pursued his duties as a missionary and went from village to village preaching about Sikhism. He was a powerful speaker and became successful in his endeavours. However, his success was resented by fundamentalist Hindu organisations in the Punjab, like the Arya Samaj. He was harassed by these groups to the extent that his

³²RAW and IB are Indian intelligence agencies.

fellow missionaries were beaten up, their transport set alight and even the copies of the Sikh Scriptures they carried were torn and burnt³³. He became increasingly aware of the injustice of broken promises in Punjab and the widespread discrimination against the Sikhs and started to speak out against this. In fact, it was Bhindranwale who initiated the peaceful agitation in Punjab (on July 20, 1982): everyday, 51 members of his group would go out on demonstrations and court arrest. Later, when the Akali Dal decided to take up the cause and launched its state-wide campaign, Bhindranwale terminated his demonstrations and backed the Akali morcha for the implementation of the Anandpur Resolution.

It is often said that Bhindranwale was a creation of Mrs. Gandhi, which went wrong: She supported him when her opponents were in power, but he became a nuisance when she was returned to office. Well, there may well have been a change of heart on her part but as far as Bhindranwale was concerned his duty, as a Sikh, was to speak out against injustice. This he did, irrespective of who was in power.

To counteract Bhindranwale's growing popularity, the Indian government launched a vicious propaganda campaign against him. They branded him as an armed extremist and accused him of being responsible for terrorism in Punjab. In the media, he was portrayed as a fanatical figure reeking havoc in Punjab from the sanctuary of the Golden Temple. He was even dubbed India's Khomeni.

However, the only 'evidence' for these allegations was circumstantial — the naive argument ran along the lines of, 'Oh look lots of people have been killed in Punjab and there are people with guns in the Golden Temple'. For a start, the figures of violence seem to have been exaggerated — over the two years of the morcha, virtually every murder in Punjab was attributed to the agitation. The fact that most murders in Punjab arise from family feuds (over land ownership etc.) seems to have been forgotten. Indeed, the rest of India was hardly free from murder and violence over the same period! Nevertheless, there were some acts of terrorism with a blatantly sectarian flavour. But these acts could never be condoned by a Sikh for they run totally against the grain of Sikhism.

³³A particularly vicious incident took place at Chando Kalan, just inside the Haryana border on 13th September, 1981.

These acts were, rightly, condemned by Bhindranwale and the other Sikh leaders.

As the agitation progressed, however, an increasing note of cynicism crept into Bhindranwale's condemnations:

In Patiala, one Ashok Kumar was shot dead. No Sikh expressed the view that this was a good act. The killing was condemned by all the responsible Sikh leaders. But even before his cremation, a judicial enquiry was ordered into the circumstances of his death. On the other hand, the Akali Dal has repeatedly demanded judicial enquiries into the killing of 150 Sikhs but Indira has not ordered an enquiry into even in a single case!

This introduces another important point: over the two years of the morcha, an equal, if not greater, number of Sikhs were killed — 150 'died' while in police custody, 25 people were shot dead at just one peaceful demonstration³⁴ and scores of Sikhs were massacred in the neighbouring state of Haryana³⁵. Of course, this does not excuse the murder of Hindus in Punjab, but it does illustrate the way in which the facts were distorted — massive coverage was given to the activities of alleged Sikh terrorists while little or no coverage was given to the atrocities committed against the Sikhs and nor to the peaceful nature of the agitation.

So far as arms at the Golden Temple were concerned, it is important to remember the semi-martial nature of Sikhism. Sikhs do not consider bearing arms a sin; on the contrary, every Sikh is asked to bear arms. Guru Gobind Singh's instruction to his Sikhs was:

*O' my beloved (Khalsa), hear this request of mine:
Without weapons and kesh do not come before me.*

Thus, there have always been weapons at the Golden Temple; indeed, at every major Sikh Shrine. Most of the relics of the Sikh Gurus consist

³⁴During the 'rasta rokho' (stop the roads) movement on the 4th of April, 1983, the police fired into the piles of bodies blockading the roads. An 8-hour road blockade resulted in 24 deaths.

³⁵There was a major wave of violence against the Sikhs in Haryana in mid-February, 1984. The attitude of this state's Chief Minister was one of, 'that'll teach you a lesson'.

either of Scriptures or their weapons. The very emblem of Sikhism consists of weapons and Sikhs are initiated into their faith by the Baptism of the Double-edged Sword. To suddenly turn around and say that we cannot tolerate arms in a place of worship is just ludicrous!

As we have seen, 'Liberation Theology' is at the very heart of Sikhism. There is no inconsistency in running a civil rights campaign from the Akal Takhat (or even in keeping arms there). Indeed, since the Akal Takhat was set up to champion the cause of religious freedom and civil liberties, and is the centre for the Sikhs' temporal decisions, it was the right place from which to spearhead the campaign.

Although Sikhs bear arms, they are only permitted to use them as a last resort. Even the great symbol of pacifism, Mahatma Gandhi, defended this right: In 1931, he addressed the Sikhs at Gurdwara Sis Ganj to give them his personal assurance that Congress would not renege on its promises to the Sikhs. When questioned further as to what the Sikhs could do if they were betrayed, he replied, 'In that case take their Kirpans (swords) in hand with perfect justification before God and man.'³⁶

But the Sikhs are committed to peace and so the agitation was always a peaceful one; not surprisingly, Bhindranwale backed this whole heartedly. However, as the campaign progressed, the government's reaction to the agitation on the ground was to engage in a vicious persecution of those taking part in the protests. Suspected activists were arrested and tortured by the police, and often murdered in so-called 'encounters with terrorists'.³⁷ What was more, the families of these suspected activists were also harassed, frequently to the extent of being thrown in jail, being physically abused and having their property and livelihoods burnt down. As time went on, these atrocities grew and Bhindranwale was forced to add the proviso:

You can only have justice if there is the rule of law, someone to enforce it, and the right of appeal. Where will you go when no one cares for the

³⁶Young India: 16th March, 1931.

³⁷A catalogue of the major atrocities can be found in *The Betrayal of the Sikhs*, published by the Sikh Ex-Servicemen & Intellectuals Forum, Chandigarh (p. 28-34). Amnesty International has also noted that, in India, it is a common practice for the police to torture and murder a prisoner and put it down as 'killed in a police encounter'.

judge or for the law and they are all-powerful. With your own hands you will then have to solve the problem.

For the Sikhs who were able to see the actual situation, Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa, Bhindranwale, was the epitome of their Faith — a man committed to the high ideals of being a Saint-Soldier:

Even if it results in my body being cut to small pieces, I shall still fight against injustice.

If I am to live, I wish to live with honour. If I am to die, I wish to die for the Panth.

I do not fear physical death, but death of the conscience is a sure death.

Those people who have spent some time with Bhindranwale vouch for his true character. For example, Dr. Joyce Pettigrew, of Queen's University, Belfast, writes of Bhindranwale:

I met Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and Amrik Singh (president of the All India Sikh Students Federation) in mid-December, 1983. They were not the fanatical figures full of hatred that the press portrayed. Bhindranwale was quiet, with a sense of humour. He listened intently to the questions, answering directly if he could. On one occasion when he could not he said quite openly that he had studied only to the fifth grade. He was unpretentious, apologising twice if anything he had said offended me. Amrik Singh was very kind and possibly the more saintly of the two, but with less charismatic appeal.³⁸

But sadly, a 'fanatical extremist' is how Bhindranwale was portrayed; even now it is disheartening to read newspaper reports referring to him as 'the high-priest of violence'.

Mrs. Gandhi successfully manipulated the situation into portraying a regional dispute threatening her power as a communal one. To this end it is more than probable that her supporters were prepared to sacrifice innocent Hindu lives. Having made Bhindranwale a scape-goat, the scene

³⁸*South Asia Research*: Vol. 4, No. 2 – November 1984.

was now set for the attack on the Golden Temple — for now, the army action would not only wipe out the threat to her from the Punjab, but also it would make her popular with the majority Hindu electorate. Her attempt to abuse the democratic system in this way³⁹ has sown the seeds of anger and anguish into many hearts.

We should conclude this section with a short account of the army action in June. But before that, it is worth considering, briefly, the role of extremist Hindu organisations, like the Arya Samaj, in the agitation.

There exist in India several fanatical Hindu organisations such as the Arya Samaj, Jan Sang and the RSS. They are intolerant of all other religions, half the Arya Samaj's 700 page 'bible', the 'Satyarath Parkash', being devoted to attacks on other faiths⁴⁰. They are particularly savage on Sikhism and portray Sikhs as kind of renegade Hindus. Since Independence, they have engaged in both overt and covert anti-Sikh activities. For example, it was the influence of these groups which led Punjabi Hindus to disown Punjabi in the language census. The motive for this was to prevent the formation of a Punjabi-speaking state and thereby undermine the cultural roots of Sikhism. In many ways, this was the real underlying cause of the troubles in the Punjab.

In the context of the agitation, they did as much as possible to divide the Sikhs and Hindus of Punjab. Whereas the Sikhs regarded the morcha as a campaign for the benefit of all Punjabis (Hindus and Sikhs), they devoted their energies to turning the Punjabi Hindus against it. They whipped-up a lot of anti-Sikh hysteria in the Indian papers (a lot of which they own) and organised provocative marches. In Amritsar, for example, they organised a march of Hindus, cigarettes in hand, shouting inflammatory slogans:

'Beedi, cigarette pean ge, budi shan se jevan ge.'

'Kach, Kara, Kirpan ehnoo pejo Pakistan.'

'Nuk te mukhi ben nee dehni, pug Punjab which ran nee dehni.'

³⁹Effectively, she sacrificed 2% of the population to win the votes of 85%.

⁴⁰The 'Satyarath Parkash' means 'Light of Truth'! The original work was due to Dyanand and slanders all religions —Sikhism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Jainism —the lot. Extracts can be found on pages 12 and 13 of reference 41.

It is difficult to translate the malice and hostility inherent in these slogans but literally, the first says that, ‘We will smoke and use drugs as we please’ and is clearly designed to insult Sikh sentiments and frustrate their attempts to accord Sacred City status to Amritsar. The very fact that all the marchers had cigarettes in their hands was a way to add bite to their bark. The second says, ‘Kach, Kara, Kirpan — send them to Pakistan’; Kach, Kara and Kirpan are three of the 5 K’s — the distinctive symbols of a baptised Sikh. The third slogan says, ‘We won’t tolerate the smallest concession, we won’t leave a single turban in the Punjab’.

In late 1983, a small international group of Hindus concerned about the disturbing situation in the Punjab went to India to look into the causes of the troubles, at first hand. In their report, *Hindu-Sikh Conflict in the Punjab: causes and cure*,⁴¹ they cite the activities of the Arya Samaj as a major factor behind the troubles:

We are particularly tempted to call it a ‘Cult’ because we hate to see it identified with our ancient (and yet modern) highly philosophical and tolerant religion of Hinduism. He were really amazed to hear that over half of the Punjab and Haryana Hindus are followers of this fanatical cult. How members of this kind of hateful sect can co-exist with other religions is hard to understand. After studying their slander on Guru Nanak and his humble teachings, we became inclined to view the causes of Hindu-Sikh conflict in a different perspective; Arya Samaj support for the Nirankaris⁴² and the object of their similar anti-Sikh activities became self explanatory. We wondered how many Arya Samajists in the garb of Hinduism have helped influence Hindu national opinion through some of their own controlled media and also perhaps affect the Government’s judgement and

⁴¹*Hindu-Sikh Conflict in the Punjab: causes and cure* by Sathananthan *et al.*, is published by the Transatlantic India Times, 8 Ashen Grove, London, SW 19. It is an authoritative account but suffers one major defect —the authors insist on saying that Sikhism is part of Hinduism; this is probably because Guru Nanak was born in a Hindu family and because of the close cultural links between the two communities. The Sikhs would disagree with this contention —it’s like calling Christians Jews.

⁴²Nirankaris are one of the movements which are Sikh-like in appearance but totally different, often the antithesis of Sikhism (*Khalsa*: Special Edition, June 1984 —‘The Guru of the Sikhs’). By supporting such movements, the Arya Samaj hope to exploit the Sikh-like appearance of these groups and divide the Sikhs.

its decisions through the positions they may occupy in the ruling party and the senior posts they hold in the Civil-Service. The anti-Sikh mentality of former Home Minister Gulzarilal Nanda, and former Prime Minister Charan Singh are perhaps due to their origin in the Arya Samaj and also responsible for influencing the usually impartial attitude of the Congress towards minorities.

It is quite probable that the members of the Arya Samaj and RSS were behind the callous murder of innocent Hindus — fanatical acts of pure terrorism designed to generate a hatred of the Sikhs and to drive a wedge between the two communities.

Finally, we come to ‘Operation Blue Star’, the army action in June 1984, which had absolutely no justification. The ‘storming of the Golden Temple’ received all the limelight in the government-released reports. An analysis of the events shows that the Golden Temple was used merely as an excuse and a smoke screen; it has become clear that the ‘storming of the Golden Temple’ was not even the tip of the iceberg! Every historic Sikh shrine in the Punjab was desecrated and destroyed, partially or wholly, with enormous loss of life. Even women and children trying to prevent this sacrilege were mercilessly gunned down. As there are now several books dealing with the details of the events,⁴³ I will just mention one personal incident — a tale recounted by a pilgrim travelling to Amritsar a couple of days before the attack on the Golden Temple.⁴⁴ He and other pilgrims were arrested at Tarn Taran (another Sikh Shrine a few miles from Amritsar) on the 3rd of June. They were locked up in railway carriages and left on the sidings, without food or water, for 5 days. As the temperature reached over 45°C, many of the children and the old people died in these suffocating conditions; most were unconscious. Although now released on bail after a year in jail, he still awaits trial by a

⁴³See for example, *The Invasion of the Golden Temple* by Dr. Sukhbir Singh Kapoor or *The genocide of the Sikhs* by Chuhan Maluk Singh. There are also some interesting and illuminating articles in the *Sikh Messenger*, Autumn 1984.

⁴⁴The date of operation Blue Star coincided with the anniversary of Guru Arjan Dev’s martyrdom. One of the main dates in the Sikh calendar when huge numbers of Sikh Pilgrims visit the Golden Temple. If this date was deliberately chosen, it will be yet another indication of the government’s sinister motives.

special court where he is considered guilty unless proven otherwise. In the whole of Punjab, a death toll of 15,000 would be a conservative estimate, a substantial proportion of whom were women and children. Even more shattering than the human loss is the destruction of the most sacred Sikh Shrine, the Akal Takhat, and the fact that the Sikh historical reference library in Amritsar was burnt **after** the army had taken control of the Golden Temple. This library housed priceless original manuscripts and its destruction, along with the looting and burning of other Sikh relics, is a great loss and a deep moral blow for the Sikhs; such acts are indicative of the real, sinister, motives behind operation Blue Star. Even many months after the army actions in June, correspondence with Punjab still indicated that intimidation, harassment and torture of Sikhs by the army and police was still widespread. During and after the events in June, no foreign correspondent was allowed free access to Punjab; human rights groups were refused permission to go to India to investigate the situation in the Punjab. The government appears to have been afraid lest the truth be known and its atrocities and hypocrisy exposed.

5. The aftermath

The attack on the Golden Temple marks a turning point in Sikh history. The events of June 1984 have completely changed the relationship between the Sikhs and India: most Sikhs no longer feel at home in the Union of India—the motherland they held in the highest regard for so long and the country for which they sacrificed their all. The massacre of several thousand Sikhs in Delhi, and in other Indian cities,⁴⁵ following the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, has only fuelled the severe feeling of alienation. Divisions amongst the Sikh leadership itself has also added to the sense of frustration.

Elections in Punjab have now been held and an Akali government elected to office. Whether this indicates support for the so-called moderates or whether it is more a reflection of weariness of living under military rule remains to be seen. In either case, the underlying causes of the discontent and the feeling of indignation among the Sikhs still remains; all that can be said is that the future is very uncertain.

Hardly five months had elapsed since operation Blue Star when the Sikhs suffered a second traumatic experience. This manifested itself in an orgy of violence directed against them in Delhi, and other Indian cities, following the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. If the Sikhs of Punjab bore the brunt of the army actions in June, then it was the Sikhs in the rest of India who faced the onslaught of the barbaric brutality in November. These gruesome events have now been investigated and catalogued by civil-rights groups such as the PUDR, the PUCL, and the Citizens for Democracy,⁴⁶ The common conclusion reached by the various groups was that the 'riots' were not an expression of 'madness' or popular 'grief and anger' at Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, as they have been portrayed by the authorities. Rather, they were the outcome of a well organised and well executed plan by important politicians in the Congress(I) at the top

⁴⁵Although the official death toll was put at several hundred, Lord Hatch of Lusby, who went to Delhi in November to investigate the events puts the figure at 'at least three thousand'. Other civil-rights groups also estimate the figure to be several thousand.

⁴⁶The Peoples Union for Democratic Rights and the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties have published their findings in the report *Who are the Guilty?* The Citizens for Democracy has published its findings in *Truth about Delhi Violence: report to the nation*, by Rao, Ghose, Pancholi and Tarkunde.

and by the administration authorities.

One outcome of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination has been to bring her son Rajiv to the forefront of Indian politics. This change has been seen as a radical new dimension and one that brought with it a ray of hope for India. Since taking office in November, Rajiv has shown himself to be a dynamic leader excelling in the powers of tact and diplomacy. His confidence and proven ability have won him acclaim as an international statesman. He has successfully held elections in the troubled state of Punjab. But despite all this, most Sikhs still regard him with deep suspicion and distrust. It is instructive to see why.

Well, the Sikhs do not see Rajiv as a 'new' ray of hope: in the latter years of Mrs. Gandhi's life she was grooming him to take over her leadership. He had entered politics only a few years ago when his younger brother, and aspiring leader, was killed in a plane crash. In a matter of months he was promoted from a novice to one of the most senior figures in the Congress party. Indeed, one could go further and say that he was very much in the driving seats in the months before his mother's death and may have been instrumental in goading her to send the army into the Golden Temple. So, the Sikhs hold Rajiv equally responsible as Indira Gandhi for operation Blue Star.

The Sikhs' distrust of Rajiv's intentions has grown in the aftermath of the November massacres. For many months he refused to hold an independent judicial enquiry into the events. Considering the scale of the carnage and the large body of evidence pointing to the involvement of leading members of his own party in organising the riots,⁴⁷ his refusal to hold an enquiry raises serious questions about his own role in the affair. The suspicion is that such an enquiry would have implicated Rajiv directly in the riots. Whether this is so or not, his refusal to hold the enquiry and bring the guilty to justice makes him equally guilty, at least in the eyes of the Sikhs.

In the light of these events, outbursts by Rajiv and other Indian politicians about 'terrorism' have a very hollow ring. Weren't the scenes of horrific murders of innocent Sikhs on the streets of Delhi acts of terror-

⁴⁷See 46.

ism of the most brutal kind? Surely, their only purpose was to literally terrorise the Sikh population in India. When the widowed victims of these atrocities can identify those who led the riots, and these individuals are not only free but some even hold senior positions in parliament and in Rajiv's administration, does this not make a farce of the pious sermons about 'terrorists'? Indeed, is it not strange that people like N. D. Pancholi, general secretary of the Citizens for Democracy, who condemn all forms of terrorism, are arrested and charged with sedition for co-authoring a report on the atrocities, while those who incited the communal massacres are allowed to go free? Surely, it is the height of hypocrisy to ban the reports of these civil-rights groups on the grounds that they could 'create hatred and spread disaffection among the people' when it is really the sight of those who led the mass terrorism in November holding office in parliament that will almost certainly enflame the Sikhs!

So, it is hardly surprising the Sikhs view Rajiv Gandhi in a somewhat different light from his media image. In the Punjab elections last month (September, 1985), the 65% turnout was seen as an indication of the support for the 'moderate' Sikhs and a sign of reconciliation; this conclusion may be somewhat misleading. The accord signed between Rajiv and the late Akali leader, Longowal, does not deal with the underlying causes of the discontent. The details of the accord were never made very clear but still, if we consider some of the points, it soon becomes apparent that the concessions were very superficial. For example, one of the major concessions cited was the agreement to hold an enquiry into the November 'riots'. Considering that the immediate setting-up of such an enquiry was Rajiv's official, if not moral, duty, this can hardly be called a concession. By contrast, Rajiv certainly had no difficulty in calling for an immediate enquiry after the crash of the Air India airliner. The agreement to return Chandigarh to Punjab was also hailed as another major concession, but again the magnanimity seems to have been skin deep: Chandigarh was only offered back to Punjab in return for an 'undetermined' number of Punjabi villages being given to Haryana! But Chandigarh, itself, was an issue of contention only because large Punjabi-speaking areas (including Chandigarh) had been unjustly annexed in the formation of Haryana.

Giving back one city, whilst taking away even more land cannot solve the territorial problem; surely, it will only perpetuate it. Other 'concessions' such as the de-banning of the All India Sikh Students Federation and the proposed dismantling of the special courts where one was guilty unless proven otherwise etc., weren't really concessions at all, for these were additional problems brought about by the government's own actions — if one is wrongly imprisoned, then one's release can hardly be thought of as clemency! Most Sikhs see the accord as more of a dictate than an agreement. It does not really deal with any of the substantial grievances of the Anandpur resolution.

But if few Sikhs were satisfied with the accord, why were the elections in the Punjab not heavily boycotted? Well, the election of a civilian government was a way to end over a year-long life under military rule. Ever since June 1984, there has effectively been martial law in Punjab, enforced by about a hundred thousand troops. A general weariness of Living under constant intimidation and harassment from such a large military presence was probably a prime motive for the relatively high turnout. The other reason why the analysis of the turnout may be wrong is because the accord itself was not a major issue in the election campaign: The Akali party stood on a platform to end the military presence in the state and to release the thousands of Sikh youth imprisoned after operation Blue Star. Both these issues are strongly supported by most Sikhs. The most wanting aspect of the accord was that it seemed totally oblivious to all that had happened in the preceding months. For the Sikhs, the attack on the Golden Temple was a turning point in their history. The sense of indignation and humiliation felt by this act is beyond words. The wounds left by this attack are so deep and severe that there seems no way to repair the damage. This has forced most Sikhs to the conclusion that the ultimate solution must be an independent Sikh homeland. For now, even if Rajiv were to concede all the demands of the Anandpur Resolution, it would not be enough — the time for that has now passed. But let alone taking these feeling into account, Rajiv and Longowal failed to satisfy any of the substantial grievances of the Anandpur Resolution!

The formation of an independent Sikh homeland, however, is a very

long way off. This is not just due to political, economic and logistical considerations: The most serious damaging cause are divisions amongst the Sikh leadership itself. If Rajiv's ulterior motives for signing the accord with Longowal and holding elections in Punjab was to solve the Punjab problem by way of 'divide and rule', then it is the Sikh leadership which must take the blame for allowing this to happen. The Sikh leaders have let personal rivalries and ambitions to come before the interest of the Sikhs as a nation. They have fallen from the high ideals of the 'Politics of Freedom' and sunk to the 'politics of power'. This behaviour of their leaders has added to the sense of frustration and it is fair to say that, at present, no Sikh leader commands the respect and trust of Sikhs at large. This is probably the cause of the popular rumours that Bhindranwale is still alive. Amongst the Sikhs, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was the most respected and trusted Sikh leader of recent times. Unlike the others, he was sincere and true to his word (perhaps this was because, unlike the others, he was not a politician). For example, Bhindranwale, Longowal and other leading figures all took the same vow to press for the implementation of the Anandpur Resolution and committed themselves to continue this fight until either the resolution was accepted or they lost their lives in trying to achieve that end.⁴⁸ When it came to the test, Bhindranwale stood his ground and sacrificed his life for his principles; Longowal, on the other hand, not only cowered in the face of the bullets, but as the 'dictator' of the agitation he also terminated the protests without getting a single demand implemented. The rumours about Bhindranwale's escape seem to be based purely on vain hope and desperation and are a sad reflection on the Sikh leadership of today.

Finally, before we conclude our discussion, we should consider the role of the media in the events. Personally, the most important lesson of the whole episode has been the realisation of the inadequacies of the

⁴⁸The concept of 'Mur-jivda' or the 'living- martyrs' was introduced by the Akalis in August 1983; it was a pledge to continue the struggle for the implementation of the Anandpur Resolution even if it meant sacrificing one's life. The formal vow was taken by both Longowal and Bhindranwale, along with a reported 125,000 Sikhs. In fact, the 'Mur-jivda' oaths were taken under the 'jurisdiction' of Longowal, in his capacity as the 'dictator' of the agitation.

news media. This is the only major instance when I have had two independent sources of information — the media and my friends and relatives in Punjab. The pictures of the agitation that emerge are alarmingly different. A saintly and highly respected Sikh, Bhindranwale, was portrayed as a fanatical hoodlum reeking havoc in Punjab from the sanctuary of the Golden Temple. One can see why this picture would be beneficial to the Indian government, but it is difficult to see any motive for the international press to propagate this fallacy. One can only assume that it was due to the overwhelming power and dominating position of the Indian government combined with a failure to probe deeply into the real facts and issues. In itself, this conclusion has serious implications but the alternative would imply an even more dangerous state of affairs.

The words ‘terrorists’ and ‘extremist’ inherently generate a repulsion — a person called a terrorist is automatically considered guilty and thought of as sort of sub-human. Indeed, acts of terrorism are sub-human but there is a disturbing inconsistency in whom we call a terrorist. Take Central America, for example, the groups fighting against the government of El Salvador are called terrorists by President Reagan but he supports the Contras fighting against the Nicaraguan government, calling them freedom fighters, even though both indulge in similar activities of violence. It seems that the words terrorist and extremist are often more a reflection of one’s own preference or bias than an objective description. If we are to be honest, we must condemn all acts of terrorism. All too often we refrain from condemning the atrocities of our ‘friends’ and allies — we make up excuses about other considerations and dress up their acts in a different language. But if we are prepared to put our economic and other interests before justice and human rights we should not be surprised to see ourselves become the targets of those at the receiving end of the injustice.

Because the words ‘terrorist’ and ‘extremist’ generate such strong emotions, they are open to abuse. In the case of Punjab, as we have seen, the media allowed itself to be used in this way. It is a sobering thought that if the Indian government had not succeeded in misrepresenting the agitation (to others and most importantly to itself), operation Blue Star and the consequent assassination of Mrs. Gandhi followed by

the November massacres might never have occurred.

Sadly the conclusion can only be that the situation is still very grim. Prospects for peace in Punjab, in particular, and India in general, are very uncertain. In a way, justice is a prerequisite for peace — unfortunately, justice in India is hard to find. The new Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, has shown himself to be a talented leader with formidable abilities. At least for the Sikhs, he has yet to demonstrate that his intentions are honest and sincere.

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